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John William Burgon. B.D.
Dean of Chichester

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Printed for the first time in the
Houghton Conquest Parish Magazine.
Sept. 1903 — Sept. 1904.

Edited by the Rev. Herbert W. Macklin, M.A.
Rector of Houghton Conquest.

Thos. Archer, M.A. Instituted May 9. 1589. Buried
Jan. 20, 1630. Born at Bury St Edmunds, Suff.,
Aug. 12, 1554. B.A. Trin. Coll. Camb. 1580, M.A. 1584



Dean Burgon's Memorandum.

1.—“Houghton Conquest was evidently a very thriving and important country village when Dr. Thomas Archer was its Rector: namely, from 1589 to 1631. The Conquests, the ancient lords of the soil,—who had been settled here for upwards of three centuries,—inhabited their ancestral seat, which stood within a stone's throw of what is still called “the Bury Farm.” They were at that time a family of sufficient importance to entertain Royalty, King James the First having been the guest of Sir Edmund Conquest in 1605. The Woodward of Thickthorn boasted that they had “continued here before and ever since the reign of King Edward the First.” The Countess of Pembroke (Sir Philip Sidney's sister) had built herself a considerable Mansion (1615) in Houghton Park, where she came to pass her widowhood. The Audleys had been settled in the place for at least a century. Sir Francis Clerke, who in 1593 had intermarried with the Conquests, also resided here, tradition says at “the Grove.” Sir Edmund Wylde held a manor in the parish, and in turn intermarried with the Clerkes. There must have been quite a little colony of lesser gentry settled in the village,—as the entries in the Parish Register show, and the many sites of moated houses in the adjoining fields attest. Such were the Bagshaws, Beverleys, Blunts, Dentons, Fitzgeoffreys, Gascoignes, Lukes, Neales, Sandys, Stockwells. The Free School, (above the Alms House,) built and endowed by Sir Francis Clerke at the close of the period above alluded to, was to be taught by a Master of Arts, and it enjoyed the privilege of sending up scholars to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge: with the Master of which College the appointment of the schoolmaster still rests.”

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2.—“ Dr. Archer himself must have been no common character. Born at Bury St. Edmunds in 1554, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and chaplain to his ‘neer kinsman,’ Dr. May, Bishop of Carlisle, he was after that prelate’s death, viz. in 1589, admitted chaplain to Archbishop Whitgift, and appointed to the Rectory of Houghton.

Preaching before King James in 1605, he evidently pleased that monarch, for he was made at once his Chaplain. This seems to have been the only considerable incident in Archer’s life. He died in 1630-1, having attained the age of 77 years, for 42 of which he had been Rector of this parish. He must have been accounted a famous preacher. He relates how he preached the funeral sermons of almost all the neighbouring clergy. He seems also to have been conspicuous as a Divine. His last will and testament reads more like a specimen of polemical Divinity than anything else. But he was also an interesting and original character, and must have been a most amusing companion, as his Note-Book shows. How that volume, by the way, has survived so many vicissitudes, I cannot understand; but it has survived them, and to this day remains in the custody of the Rector of Houghton Conquest. It proves to have been one of many such books, which Dr. Archer compiled for his own amusement, and probably that of his friends.

The Rev Joseph Hunter once assured me that he met with a similar volume of memoranda among the family papers of the Arundel family. Archer also possessed a curious library, specimens of which are occasionally met with in the neighbourhood to the present day. One valuable book is at Bedford; another I saw at Bromham.

When he was 69 he constructed his own grave and erected a monument to himself in the chancel of Houghton Church. He seems to have laid to heart an axiom which he says was a favourite one with his patron and 'very good and gracious lord,' Archbishop Whitgift:—"Tutior via est, ut bonum quod quisquis post mortem sperat agi per alios, agat dum vivit ipse per se." Nothing has been done to Archer's monument from that day to this,—except that the hand, which had become broken, was a few years ago restored. It represents him in the act of preaching; and is an interesting specimen of such memorials.—But it is time to proceed."

3.—“The steps by which Houghton Conquest declined from its state of highest prosperity seem to have been such as the following. The stormy influences of the Great Rebellion made themselves severely felt in this secluded village. Walker, in his “Sufferings of the Clergy,” describes how a Rector of Houghton, (Dr. Edward Martin, inducted in 1637,) became one of the victims of the period. The fortunes of the knightly house which for 400 years had resided at ‘Houghton Bury,’ seem to have sensibly declined. Before the beginning of the 18th century they had decreased largely in affluence and in local importance; until in 1732-3 the male line became extinct in the person of Benedict Conquest, Esq.

By the middle of the century, the Woodwards, Audleys, Clerkes, Wyldes, had all died out. Houghton Park had repeatedly changed hands. The lesser gentry were reduced to two or three families.

The village itself being singularly retired, seems to have been considered an undesirable place of abode by several of the later incumbents. Dr. Pearce, Master of Jesus College, who held the living from 1786 till 1820, was certainly non-resident. It seems reasonable to ascribe the decadence of Houghton, more to the non-residence of certain of the Incumbents than to any other cause. The village steadily degenerated until the end of the century. An unworthy curate is still remembered as a scandal to his calling, and a real misfortune to the parish. The people took to poaching and acts of depredation,—not to say of violence. It was deemed unsafe to come through the village after dark. There was a common saying in the county that ‘Bedford Goal would fall when it did not contain a Houghton man.’ The roads were utterly impassable in winter. We have heard old people say that they remember when it was simply impossible to get across the road in the village except by means of stepping-stones.”

4. "Let it be remarked in passing that it is probably in consequence of the outlying character of the parish that so many old usages lingered on here till a comparatively recent period. In 1789, a man and a woman, (their name and their offence have not been forgotten,) did penance publicly in the church. During Divine Service, the males still occupy one half of the body of the church, (the northern half,)—the females the other. Labourers' wives, twenty years ago, used always to curtsey on entering the Church door, They still curtsey at the "Gloria Patri." It is, —or was till 1869—the custom for the communicants to come into the chancel; making their offering as they passed the chancel arch, and tarrying there, (according to the rubric of 1549), "the men on the one side, and the women on the other side." It may be added that though the Church is dedicated to All Saints, (of which festival no special notice is taken,) the Town-Feast is kept on the Sunday after St. James' Day. The meaning of this is that the church will have been dedicated on the latter festival.

To return however to what was being stated concerning the low ebb to which Houghton had fallen some 80 or 100 years ago."

6. "The author of the first step, as far as we know, towards the spiritual regeneration of the parish, was an excellent Curate, named Ingle; who, with his mother, and sister Isabella, lived at Houghton early in the present century. He it was who first set on foot a Sunday School in the parish.

But the Rev. Thomas Barber, who was Rector of Houghton from 1821 to 1838 was its first important benefactor. Of humble origin, but a man of excellent parts,—a man of piety also. and endued with a strong will and singular bodily vigour,—Barber was the very man for Houghton at the precise juncture when, by the good providence of God, he became Rector. He enforced order in the church by the power of his lungs, and in the streets by the weight of his arm. He carried a stick,—and sometimes used it. As magistrate, he procured the transportation of a surprising number of his dearly beloved brethren,—the worst offenders in the parish. Ever since his vigorous incumbency, the place has been steadily improving. Houghton is at present I suspect second in character to none of the surrounding parishes.

One important particular in which Barber conferred a material benefit on the Living, deserves to be specially recorded. He recovered to the Rectorial Income about £100 a year in tithe, which had been long unjustly withheld from the incumbent of the parish; if I remember rightly, on the pretence that part of the acreage of the parish was royal park-land."

7.—“ But it was as a zealous parish priest that Mr. Barber made himself most conspicuous at Houghton. He was truly earnest and assiduous in his sacred Calling. The result of his endeavours,—the very monument of the revival which he effected in the parish,—was the Wesleyan Chapel, (it almost broke his heart), which was built and endowed, out of mere spite, by a farmer named Armstrong,—the decayed representative of what had once been a gentle family hereabouts. No effort had the Wesleyans, or any other body of Non-conformists, ever made on behalf of Houghton. so long as Religion here was really at a very low ebb. Barber was the instrument of a distinct revival; and the standard of rebellion was forthwith planted beside the road leading to the Rectory by the disciples of John Wesley.—But to return to something pleasanter.”

9. "This may be as fitting a place as any for saying a few words concerning the ancient Rectory house,—which will have been supplanted in the beginning of the 18th century by the present substantial structure. We are indebted to a few scanty notices in Dr. Archer's MS. for all our knowledge on this subject, and one can but wish that the good man had been a little more communicative. He explains that anciently there were here two Rectories and two Rectors,—one, of the moiety called Houghton Franchise,—the other, of Houghton Guildable, and a Rectory house belonging to either. Of these two parsonage houses, he describes the one, (it belonged to Houghton Franchise,) as "moated about." The other, by the church, as "abutting on parish-house on the north, next to the church wall." He found it thatched, and caused it to be tiled in 1620."

10. "I cannot help thinking that Archer must be here alluding to the very ancient tenement,—now the property of a farmer named Armstrong, whose garden is still bounded by the west wall of the churchyard. Behind it, on the north side of the churchyard, is a stew for fish. "Parish-house" will have also stood somewhere hereabouts, but has long since disappeared.

Archer, who held by special license both Rectories, (they were formally united in 1637) informs us that he lived entirely in the moated house belonging to Houghton Franchise, and which it is also certain must have stood on the site of the present Rectory. The other he let to different tenants in succession. One of these bore the name of Christopher Shakespeare:— which famous surname, Archer, (like others of his time,) writes Shacspur."

11. "When Archer speaks of 'the row of elms growing along from the parsonage gate to the bridge over the moat leading on to the parsonage-house called Houghton Conquest or Franchise'—which he says were planted by himself in 1612,—his words are more than usually suggestive. He shows that Houghton Rectory has been approached by an avenue (of elms if not of limes) for upwards of 250 years: and that then, as now, 'the parsonage gate' was at a distance from the Rectory. The 'bridge' has long since disappeared: but from the accounts many a time given us by aged inhabitants of the village of the state of things anterior to Barber's occupancy, it is plain that a bridge of some sort was needed so late as the beginning of the present century, in order to approach the Rectory-house without inconvenience. It must have been Barber, in short, who brought the place to its present appearance, and who doubtless reduced the size of the moat on the north side of the house. Two or three grand old elms were standing inconveniently near the Rectory in 1838, and were cut down. These may well have been some of 'the elms planted in the parsonage yard' of which Archer elsewhere speaks. There are still traces of 'willows also growing about the moat and the ponds belonging to the parsonage.' But the yew-trees,—which I believe once entirely enclosed the lawn on the south, and of which Archer makes no mention, may have been all in existence in his time. Until 1873, a considerable portion of the old Rectory house was standing,—continuing the present Rectory in an easterly direction, with an elbow to the north. It was used for a kitchen, scullery, laundry, manservant's bedroom, and other offices. It had become considerably dilapidated through sheer tract of time."

12. "It was reserved for Mr. Barber's successor to restore many of the windows which he found closed. On the west side of the house, three windows were opened where before there had not been a single perforation; and a glass door was constructed, leading from the drawing room into the garden. A projecting attic-window was opened on the east side, and a smaller window below it. Nine such openings were made in all. The little piece of paddock beyond the moat was parted off on the south side of the house; and a long acre of kitchen garden was enclosed and taken into cultivation on the east. More substantial and costly still was the benefit conferred on the locality by the construction of entirely new drains. The moat was repeatedly cleared."

13. "In 1838 then, as already explained, many traces of the former state of things lingered on in Houghton; some of which are now either disappearing, or have already disappeared. The road past the Rectory house could be traced all the way to the Ruins on the hill; and the ponds or decoys in 'coy meadow' (as it is still called) all existed embowered in foliage in the hollow. These ponds have since been filled, the trees grubbed up, and the land ploughed over."

14. "There were to be seen, at the time I speak of, considerable remains of the old brick and timber homestead of the Conquest family,—a picturesque moated residence, with carved eaves,—which was indifferently called 'Conquest Bury' or 'The Bury Farm.' An aged woman,—('neighbour Geeves' we used to call her: she was 84 in 1840, and had seen the Lord Mayor's Show when Wilks was Mayor:)—used to relate how her husband's mother had been a servant to the family at the Bury. The name 'Benedicta,' still surviving in the village, was doubtless bestowed in honour of 'Benedict,' the last of the Conquests; whose daughter and heiress conveyed the property by marriage into the Arundel family. What remained of the old house was demolished, to our extreme regret, in 1856; when the present farm-house was erected on a slight eminence to the south-east of it, and much of the moat was filled in. A row of yews which yet remain mark what must have been part of the ancient garden. I may add that the old approach to Conquest Bury in London Lane is still clearly discernable. The drive up to the mansion remains; and the place where the outer gates stood, is distinctly to be traced.

In what a pleasant hollow of the hills did that ancient mansion lie, and how admirably had the site been selected for a residence! A belt of bright red gravelly sand is here, together with an abundant spring of excellent water which still wells out of the green hill-side. Screened were the inmates of that dwelling from observation on the east and south and west by the rising ground: and before a little spinney was cut down (which doubtless represented a more considerable plantation), on the north likewise. It is a sweet secluded spot, in which for half a thousand years generation after generation of one single family grew up to maturity, disported themselves, and died: a *very* sweet secluded spot! The hills immediately above it and around it command a capital view of all the country round.—But to proceed."

15.—“The ‘Manor House,’ (now occupied by a wheelwright named Atterbury, a very respectable person,) still stands in the village; but it has quite lost its picturesque appearance. It used to tell its own tale at once,—standing in that spacious yard, and wearing every mark of a modest tenement of the Jacobean period of the better stamp.”

16.—“Till lately, very aged people remembered ‘The Grove,’—as an old house was called which stood in a meadow near Dame Ellensbury’s. You may still trace the exact ground-plan of that house on the sward, in dry summer weather. It had a bay-window on either side of the entrance, and fronted the south. The shape of this small estate by the way explains the reason of the strangely abrupt bend the road makes soon after you pass the Church before you reach the high-road to Ampthill.”

17.—“Mr. John Higgins of Turvey Abbey, (who died aged 78 in 1846), remembered going to a ball at what are now called ‘Houghton Ruins.’ I may mention that within the last 30 years the remains of that very interesting mansion have been considerably impaired. Several grand old trees (wych-elms) which prolonged the avenue in a northerly direction to a very great distance have been felled within the same period. Nothing however that has hitherto happened thereabouts has availed sensibly to diminish the beauty of the walk from Houghton, past those ruins, to Ampthill. Our favourite way was to skirt past King’s Wood, keeping the wood always to our left, and after entering the park, so to ascend the rising ground as to survey from among the oaks as we walked along, the exquisite beauty of the landscape south and west and north of Houghton. Many hundreds of times have we taken that walk, and always (I think,) with increased delight and admiration. We were generally careful to halt for a moment at a seat inscribed by the late Lord Holland,—JOHN HOOKHAM FRERE. It stands under an oak in the park, from which a capital view is commanded, (Frere’s favourite view I suppose); but the words, very distinct 30 years ago, are now all but illegible.”

18.—“The Almshouse and School which had become much dilapidated was to a great extent re-built (under the directions of T. L. Donaldson, Esq.) in 1851,—being re-opened 11th January in the ensuing year. The three dormer windows on the south side were then introduced; and the two external staircases of stone were added. The walls and chimneys were almost re-built, and the roof was renovated. But in September and October, 1872, in consequence of the new Education Act, the School underwent several further improvements. The windows were made new on the north side, and a large central window was introduced on the south front. There had been a small class-room at the northern extremity of the chamber looking north and south which was now thrown into the body of the school: and a small west window was introduced into the boys' school. A porch was also constructed at the summit of the two external flights of steps.”

19.—“ But it was the Parish Church of Houghton which, by the year 1838, had fallen into a state of the most deplorable decadence, by reason of the utter neglect which it had experienced for nearly 200 years. The tower-arch and the chancel-arch had both been walled up with lath and plaster. The upper half of the east window had been blocked up in a similar way, three wooden mullions having been introduced below. The window at the western extremity of either aisle was blocked. The fine old oak seats occupied their present places: but all round the Church, and within the Chancel, stood high, unsightly, square deal pews. One, of wainscot, painted white, (the pew of the Conquest family,) was distinguishable from the rest; being furnished with a little window of wood, through which the preacher might be scrutinized. It was situated towards the eastern extremity of the south aisle. Towards it pointed a little iron rod, projecting from above one of the columns; on which a helmet used to be placed, and from which a banner or other heraldic achievement used to hang. A formidable pulpit, surmounted by a sounding-board, stood just behind the present reading-desk. Altar-rails, (they are still to be seen above the tower-arch,) enclosed the altar on three sides. An old hour-glass stand was found lying about, which is now preserved in the vestry. Aged inhabitants remember a little ancient room which constituted the upper storey of the vestry: and the situation of the fire place and of the stairs could still be distinctly traced. With the memorable exception of Dr. Archer's silver-gilt chalice and paten (dated 1620,) the appointments of the Holy Table were all of the most sordid type.”

20.—“Something was at once attempted for the fabric. The chancel was re-roofed and receiled: the chancel-arch and the tower-arch were opened. The altar-rails were placed all along the front of the altar. The bells which had become cracked and unfit for use, were re-cast by Mears in 1840, into a smaller peal of six, at an expense of £54. They were first rung on the birth of the Prince of Wales in 1841. The inscriptions on a yet older peal of bells are recorded by Dr. Archer. Texts from the Vulgate, selected by the Rector, appear also on the new peal. All that was mean was removed from the House of God: and (what is most important of all) the people were gradually educated to desire to see their Parish Church restored to a state of beauty. This was at last (1869-70) happily effected under the directions of Sir G. G. Scott, at an expense of considerably more than £3000, of which one third (the cost of restoring the chancel) was entirely sustained by the Rector. Towards the restoration of the Church, the parish made itself responsible for £800. The Duke of Bedford and the Rev. Lord John Thynne liberally contributed the rest. It ought to be stated in addition that a pious gentlewoman residing at Oxford, Miss Eliza Hargreave, out of her great affection for the Archdeacon, contributed £300 towards the restoration of the Chancel: and that Lord John Thynne gave the altar rails, which had before belonged to Westminster Abbey. The pulpit and reading-desk were the kind gift of two other of the Rector's friends,—Miss Mary and Miss Sarah Windle of Oxford. To the munificence of C. L. Higgins, Esq., of Turvey Abbey, the church is mainly indebted for its fine organ.”

21—"The skill with which the work of restoration was conducted, must be apparent to everyone attentively inspecting the church. Whatever could possibly be retained was retained. Whatever was simply injured, or mutilated, was faithfully reproduced. Much that seemed hopelessly lost was recovered. Nothing was rejected but what was in itself despicable, (as the old pulpit,)—essentially modern and bad, (as the brick paving,)—or worthless, (as the mullions of cement, brick, wood.) The porch, for example, was a dilapidated structure, entered by a semi-circular brick arch, and covered with a crazy roof; without battlements, cross, niche, or indeed ornament of any kind. The windows were blocked. It is now nearly rebuilt,—re-roofed, re-ceiled with oak; and the windows were opened. But the curious figures of angels at the angular summits of the two sides, were retained: or rather, one was retained, and the other (which the weather had hopelessly destroyed,) was faithfully reproduced. The rude indication of a sundial on the side of the doorway was religiously preserved.—In the Vestry, the two ancient windows, (which the former Incumbent with well-meant assiduity had well-nigh obliterated,) were carefully restored: and special care was taken not to injure some ancient writing scratched with a needle or other sharp instrument within the doorway."

22.—“The window at the western extremity of either aisle was opened. I think it was in the Tower that the coat-of-arms in stained glass was found which for security has been inserted in the most north-westerly of the Chancel windows. Everywhere the utmost conservatism was practised. Thus it was resolved not to build of stone the lower part of the Conquest's altar-tomb,—which proved to be of brick covered with plaster and painted to imitate Purbeck marble. The flower-pattern on the screen was renovated in exact conformity with what was still discernible there, aided by a skilful tracing made by dearest E.M.B. some 30 years before. The decorated carving at the summit alone is new. An illegible text from the Vulgate could just be recognized where now an English text is seen. Much was it wished to retain in the Chancel Archer's inscribed oaken altar-step. When this was found impracticable, as much of it as was inscribed was at least preserved in the Vestry. It was not thought desirable to disturb the Font,—though it is clearly no longer in its original position. In every respect, as far as was practicable, the work was strictly a restoration of the ancient structure. The changes, such as they are, were every one improvements. Thus a beautiful ogee window was substituted for one of very inferior type at the eastern extremity of the north aisle. No cost was spared. Every boss and corbel was carved. In order to separate the place occupied by the ringers from the Church, the Rector at his own expense erected the present ornamental iron screen which occupies the lower part of the Tower Arch.”

23.—“A striking instance of skilful restoration deserves to be specially recorded in connexion with the East window,—the upper half of which had long been blocked; three wooden mullions doing duty below. Scott discovered on the stone window-sill faint yet sufficient tokens of the four mullions which had been only not obliterated when a wooden frame had been inserted into the lower part of the window. Presently, sitting on the roof of the Church surveying through his lorgnette the general structure, he fastened on the ornament which surmounted the East end of the Chancel. We remarked to him that it was a fragment of the former cross,—for such it really seemed. ‘That never was part of a Cross,’ (he replied,)—‘but it is part of the tracery of a window. I can see the cavity for the insertion of the glass.’ To be brief, it proved to be the one necessary clue to the tracery of the East window. Reversed, it shewed the Architect exactly how to reproduce the window which had else entirely disappeared.—with the exception of a very few insignificant fragments built into the walls as old materials.”

24.—“ It was ascertained in the course of all these substantial repairs, that a much older fabric of considerable importance had occupied the site of the present Church. Some fragments of the capital and bases of the ancient Norman columns were found and have been religiously preserved. A niche (which must have once contained a statue of the Blessed Virgin) came to light at the east end of the south aisle behind where the organ now stands : and the frescoes of St. Christopher above the north door, and of the ‘ Majesty ’ above the Chancel arch, as well as of the Apocalyptic dragons on the walls of the south aisle,—still indicate what must once have been observable in every quarter. Whatever of this kind came to light was left exposed.”

25.—“So long as these works were in progress, Divine Service was performed (by license of the Bishop) in the Schoolroom. The repairs were commenced by an act of demolition on the afternoon of Monday, 5th April, 1869. On Sunday, 28th August, 1870, Divine Service was for the first time performed in the renovated and beautified structure.”

26.—“The Rev. Lord John Thynne having liberally presented the parish with an extension of its Churchyard on the east side, and enclosed it with a wall, the additional space was consecrated and formally opened November 8th, 1870.”

27.—“And this is the latest event in connection with the parish, of which it is judged expedient in this place to preserve a written memorial. These pages would not suffice to record the many delightful recollections, the many precious details of a personal and private kind which rise up unbidden before the memory of the present writer while he thus seems to be taking his latest leave of Houghton Conquest Rectory. In the chamber which for upwards of 30 years he called his own,—(the large bedroom which looks down upon the orchard and the avenue, and is furnished with a narrow window to admit the setting sun,)—in that room he has spent, as he thinks, the happiest hours of his life. There he produced most of his works,—such as they are. There he always seemed to himself to study more successfully than anywhere else. Well might this be the case; for there he was surrounded by those who loved him,—those whom he entirely loved. Below stairs was an excellent Library; and what was better, there was one always ready to afford him counsel and assistance. It would be impracticable in this place to enter into any sufficient details concerning the virtues and the merits of that excellent brother-in-law and love: to explain his worth as a learned and judicious Divine, or to enlarge on the personal graces which endeared him to all who came in his way, and which so singularly adorned and sanctified his home. A brief sketch which appeared in a local newspaper is here preserved; and therewith, a record of the mournful solemnity which terminated his connection with the flock of Houghton as their Pastor. It is in itself a large panegyric to state that Archdeacon Rose was never absent from his parish for more than two successive Sundays in 34 years. But his eulogy cannot be written here. Nor will it be found fully written anywhere in this world. And yet we know that such a life as his is not unre-membered before God.”

28. -- "To return to the personal recollections of the present writer, who reluctantly brings to a close this concluding page, in which he is glad to link himself with Houghton Conquest Rectory. Within doors, there was unfailing loving-kindness,—unbroken peace and joy: without, there was (with all their faults) a God-fearing, — a well-disposed and affectionate peasantry. No place was ever more fortunate in its neighbouring clergy than this: good and faithful men, all of them, with whom it was always delightful to be brought into familiar intercourse. The surrounding scenery must surely be of the very best type,—for we never, any of us, to the last, grew tired of it. I think on the contrary we enjoyed and admired it every year more and more. There is not a walk to be taken in any direction within a reasonable distance of the Rectory, but will be linked with some sweet, some tender recollections, so long as memory shall discharge its office. And I do believe that that green familiar landscape will not be altogether forgotten by any of us, even when we shall have closed our eyes in Death."

J. W. B.

The End.